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The Changing Power Balance

In this valedictory series by an aging columnist-reporter, there is a logical place for the most unsuccessful dinner I ever gave for President Kennedy. It should have been a very jolly party. It was small. It was to celebrate the departure to our Paris embassy of Charles E. Bohlen, whom the President greatly liked. The cook, who loved the President, really surpassed herself.

By chance, however, it was the evening of the day the President was told about the Soviet missiles in Cuba. None of us at dinner knew then why he was so unnaturally somber and withdrawn; but he made only one real contribution to the general conversation. It is this that still deserves to be recalled.

After dinner, someone had started a discussion of the chances of history.

"If you are honest with yourself," the President broke in with a kind of harsh abruptness, "there is at least an even chance of thermonuclear war within the next 10 years."

This was, of course, a fragment of President Kennedy's internal dialogue with himself, about how to deal with the challenge of the missiles in Cuba. It proves what is also clear from the book about the Cuban crisis by the late Robert Kennedy — that the nuclear weapons each side then possessed were the dominant preoccupation of the leading American policymakers.

When one thinks of President Kennedy's administration and then surveys the American government today, the natural response is to weep with regret and nostalgia. Yet it must still be noted that the Cuban crisis was radically misconceived by the very men whose coolness and courage secured

such a satisfactory result. It was not a "thermonuclear confrontation," as all then said. Conventional arms were the decisive factor.

Conventional arms were decisive because the Soviets had ventured into an area where the United States enjoyed overwhelming, unchallengeable superiority in conventional arms of every kind. Thus the Soviets had only one thing they could rationally do when they were caught red-handed with their Cuban missiles. They could only yield to the U.S. demand that the missiles be withdrawn.

This was the sole rational choice for the Soviets — and the crisis was not a real thermonuclear confrontation — for a most crudely practical reason. The United States then enjoyed a crushing superiority in strategic nuclear weapons, that has been variously estimated from 7-to-1 all the way to 10-to-1. Rational leaders of great nations do not commit national suicide because they have tried a little trick and been found out.

These are the facts that are needed to measure the horrifying changes in the world power balance that this flaccid nation has permitted in the last decade. On the one hand, our crushing strategic superiority has been allowed to dwindle to a slight inferiority. On the other hand, our formerly-immense conventional military power has been allowed to decay in an even more alarming way.

To see why these changes are truly horrifying, all you have to do is to put the Cuban boot on the other foot, as one may say. In other words, you only need to imagine another confrontation nowadays in any area where the Soviets enjoy heavy superiority in conventional arms.

A good place to think about is the Persian Gulf, where the energy jugular of this country and the West is now unhappily located. Suppose that one day next year President Ford gets word that the inflamed Iraqis, with Soviet air support, are moving on defenseless Kuwait and the other Gulf sheikdoms. Suppose that the considerable Soviet naval forces in the Indian Ocean area are simultaneously reported to be moving toward the Soviet-Iraqi naval base at Umm Qasr, at the head of the Gulf.

In these imagined circumstances, the President of the United States would lack every single one of the confidence-producing factors that the President had in 1963. Yet God knows, President Kennedy was not serenely confident throughout the Cuban missile crisis. So what would President Ford then do? Would he use strategic nuclear weapons, with the Soviets somewhat ahead in this field? Or would he use conventional arms, despite the vast Soviet lead?

These are questions the worst blatherskite in Congress ought to be worrying about. I do not mean that I expect the exact circumstances I have imagined to arise in the near future. I do not expect this. I do not mean that I think the Soviets have plans for world conquest or are contemplating a "first strike" against the United States. I do not think this.

But it is a simple rule of post-war history that, sooner or later, the Soviets always follow Lenin's recommendation to probe any temptingly mushy-looking situation. And for the reasons given above, too many situations are beginning to look mighty mushy.

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